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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000099

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/22/2029
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: PRESS FREEDOM UPDATE: MULTIPLE ATTACKS AGAINST
JOURNALISTS IN JANUARY 2009

REF: A. 08 CARACAS 1640
[1](#)B. CARACAS 0085

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
REASON 1.4 (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Supporters of the Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (GBRV) continue to try to intimidate journalists who are critical of the GBRV and government officials. There have been numerous attacks on local journalists during the first three weeks of 2009, including what appear to be contract murders of two journalists. One pro-government journalist was also attacked in Portuguesa State. In the hotly contested run-up to the February 15 referendum on a proposed constitutional referendum to eliminate term limits for elected officials, attacks on independent media outlets and journalists are likely to continue, if not increase. End Summary

Two Journalists Murdered

[1](#)2. (SBU) On January 1, El Impulso (Lara State) journalist and photographer Jacinto Lopez was kidnapped, along with his college friend Ricardo Marapacuto. Shortly after the kidnapping, Lopez was shot and killed. Marapacuto, who survived the attacks, reported to police that the assassins claimed they were each paid 1,000 dollars to make the hit. The editorial line of El Impulso has long been associated with the opposition in Lara. Investigative journalist Orel Sambrano was shot in the head and killed January 16 by two assassins on motorcycles as he walked to a local movie rental store in the city of Valencia. Sambrano, director of ABC of the Week and Radio America 890 AM, was also a lawyer and a columnist for Notitarde. The National Association of Journalists (CNP) President William Echeverria believes the killing most likely was due to Sambrano's recent articles on narcotrafficking, crime, and corruption under the previous pro-Chavez government in the state. In a public statement given by Echeverria on behalf of the CNP, "the journalist profession is in mourning. These killings are added to dozens of attempted murders and attacks on freedom of expression in the last few months. They want to trample on our profession, but we will not allow this to happen and we will not be silenced." On January 22, 2009, the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) of the Organization of American States issued a statement condemning the murder of Sambrano and urging Venezuelan authorities to investigate and prosecute those responsible for his death.

Additional Attacks on Journalists

13. (SBU) In the early morning hours of January 1, several motorcyclists believed to be associated with "La Piedrita", a political gang from the 23 January working class neighborhood of Caracas, threw tear gas canisters outside the headquarters of opposition-oriented Globovision cable news station. In 2008, the group launched similar attacks on the residence of Leopoldo Castillo, host of the Globovision evening call-in news show "Hello, Citizen," opposition-oriented newstalk radio host Marta Colomina, and against Globovision's Caracas-based headquarters (Ref A). On January 7, a violent pro-Chavez group attacked opposition oriented RCTV-International journalist Niomar Oropeza and his TV crew.

The journalist and his team were reportedly robbed at gun point, after the pro-Chavez group identified the RCTV van outside of a government building in Caracas. The reporter and his camera crew were not injured; however, they were forced to surrender their video cameras and cassette tapes to the gunmen.

14. (SBU) A violent group of pro-Chavez supporters attacked the Valencia-based facilities of Notitarde in Carabobo State.

The group, which began their two-day attack on January 15, threatened staff members, "tagged" the headquarters with graffiti, and threw rocks and stones at the building. Opposition-oriented journalist Beatriz Adrian alleges that she received a threat January 18 from Lina Ron, the leader of a militant pro-Chavez political party. The Globovision reporter claims that while she was covering a press conference of Chavez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) related to the February 15 referendum on term limits,

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she was verbally threatened by Ron. At least one local paper printed a photo of Ron pointing a finger in the face of Adrian.

15. (SBU) Early in the morning of January 19, the home of Marcel Granier, President of RCTV International, was attacked by unknown assailants who threw a tear-gas canister over the walls of the courtyard surrounding the house. While nobody was injured in the attack, this is the second time Mr. Granier's residence has been attacked this month (Ref B). RCTV, which was pulled from the public airwaves following the revocation of its broadcast license in 2007, continues to broadcast on cable TV and is widely associated with the opposition. Cecilia Rodriguez, a photographer of the hard-line opposition daily El Nuevo Pais, was physically attacked January 20 while photographing an attack by La Piedrita militants against a cultural center in downtown Caracas. Rodriguez claims that while she was photographing the notoriously violent group, she was identified as a journalist and physically restrained by police officers who then allowed three female pro-Chavez by-standers to punch her repeatedly. The journalist suffered cuts and bruises to her head and face.

16. (SBU) While the majority of attacks have occurred against opposition journalists, they were not strictly limited to anti-Chavez members of the press. In Portuguesa State, Rafael Finol, a journalist for the daily El Regional, was shot in the head. Finol, who survived the attacks, is typically pro-Chavez in his reporting. According to Zelideth Flores, member of the National Association of Journalists (CNP), this is the first time an attack against a pro-government journalist has occurred in Portuguesa State.

Comment

17. (C) President Chavez is exacerbating political

polarization in Venezuela by trying to frame the February 15 referendum on term limits as a choice between his Bolivarian revolution and the (U.S.) "empire" and its local allies ("pitiyanqis"). Moreover, Chavez and other senior GBRV officials are publicly accusing some media outlets, particularly Globovision, of being engaged in a U.S.-backed plot to destabilize his government. Embassy anticipates that spontaneous and planned violence against critical and independent journalists is likely to continue, if not increase, in the weeks ahead as the GBRV and its supporters try to rally support for -- and intimidate opposition to -- Chavez's proposed, controversial amendment. End Comment

CAULFIELD